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WEBSTER'S DRAMATIC CHARACTERIZATION IN THE WHITE DEVIL
AND THE DUCHESS OF MALFI WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE
TO ARISTOTLE'S POETICS

BY

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A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of the Graduate School
of Loyola University in Partial Fulfillment of
the Requirements for the Degree of
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Vita

The writer of this thesis, Mary Jane Grogan, was born in Chicago, Illinois, on April 13, 1930. She received her elementary education at St. Leo's Parish School on the city's south side, under the direction of the Sisters of Providence. Graduation in 1944 was followed by four years as a student at the Academy of Our Lady (Longwood) conducted by the School Sisters of Notre Dame.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

This thesis will attempt to examine two plays of the Elizabethan dramatist, John Webster, in order to compare the character delineation in these tragedies with the standards outlined by Aristotle in the Poetics. Although Poetics is a fragment of notes based upon lectures delivered by the Greek philosopher in the fourth century B.C., as a criteria for epic and dramatic poetry it has been thought a valid standard of measurement for any age. These two tragedies, The White Devil printed and probably produced in 1612, and The Duchess of Malfi produced, perhaps, in 1616 and printed in 1623, are usually considered Webster's finest artistic productions.

This particular study will differ from the many other examinations of these two tragedies in that it will focus on John Webster's tragic characters, especially insofar as they violate or fulfill Aristotle's definite pronouncements concerning the traits of the tragic hero.

Heretofore, Webster has been discussed and his plays included in many of the studies and anthologies of what has been called this "golden age" of the English drama. In fact, no study of Elizabethan drama is complete without a consideration of

Webster. There are a fair number of works devoted solely to him. His standard editor, F. L. Lucas, has edited his complete works, introducing theories of his life and times, discussing his imitation of other writers, giving further general commentary on Webster and discussing each of his plays in detail. Elmer Edgar Stoll, a scholar of the drama of this period, enlarged and revised his doctoral dissertation done at Munich in 1904 to a work entitled John Webster: The Periods of His Work As Determined By His Relations to the Drama of His Day. He says that the plays in question here belong to the poet-playwright's middle period--the period of his revenge tragedies. Stoll believes he was then under the influence of Marston.

Even closer than was Stoll's to the presently proposed research is the critical study of John Webster by Clifford Leech. He treats The White Devil and The Duchess of Malfi particularly, discusses Webster's position as a dramatic poet and emphasizes the importance of character presentation. He points out that the action of a tragedy has cosmic significance since it symbolizes the general condition of humanity, but it will not make an impact upon the audience unless the playwright's chief characters are acceptable representatives of their own kind.¹

Rupert Brooke, too, in his dissertation entitled John

¹ Clifford Leech, John Webster: A Critical Study (London, 1951), p. 106.

Webster and the Elizabethan Drama written in 1911-1912, the work with which the author won his Fellowship at King's College, Cambridge in 1913, has discussed Webster's presentation of dramatis personae. He could scarcely help doing so if he intended, as he says he does in his preface, to write enough truth about Webster to enable one reading his plays to understand them. Most of the critics agree that part of the illumination of John Webster lies in a study of his vivid and memorable characters. The picture of Webster's genius has been filled in further by theses like that of Sheppard R. Edmonds at Columbia on The Tragic Atmosphere of John Webster as well as one by Garry Norton Murphy on The Dramatic Technique of John Webster, done at the University of Cincinnati.

These, plus various shorter essays like the one by T. S. Eliot on Webster in Elizabethan Essays, and that by John A. Symonds in Italian Byways, suggest the approaches taken by students of seventeenth century literature to a figure like John Webster. While nearly all of them have touched or treated Webster's depiction of character, none has specifically considered this subject with relation to the standard of tragic characterization enunciated by Aristotle in what W. Hamilton Fyfe calls the first work of literary criticism by the world's first scientist.¹ Herein lies the difference in this study from those

¹W. Hamilton Fyfe, Aristotle's Art of Poetry: A Greek View of Poetry and Drama (Oxford, 1940), p. ix.

already conducted. This thesis will use the statements of Aristotle concerning tragic characterization as the yardstick for measurement of the characters drawn by John Webster in The White Devil and The Duchess of Malfi.

First, an attempt to sketch the history of the Poetics in western Europe will be made. Deciding whether or not this writer of the golden age of the English theatre tried to conform to the principles of dramaturgy of the Greek critic, who looked back upon another golden era of dramatic artistry, is not the purpose of this section. But an idea of general ignorance or knowledge of this treatise in England, however, might provide some insight into an understanding of John Webster, his audience and the technique of characterization employed in his plays.

Next, a statement of exactly what Aristotle predicated of character will be attempted, along with some comments on his statements. Then, considering, first, the protagonists of the two plays, examples of how these fulfill or violate Aristotle's outline of the tragic hero will be cited. Conclusions concerning the conformity or digression of these individual characters can then be posited. This will be followed by some consideration of characters less than protagonists but who are still, in Webster, very important.

Finally, a summary of all that has been done on the relationship of Webster's actual character portrayal in these two plays to the ideas of character delineation expressed by

Aristotle, as well as conclusions which follow from such a study, will be made. Chiefly, this analysis should be different and valuable in that it takes an aspect of Webster which is important --his characterization--and considers it in relation to statements of a great and universal dramatic critic whose pronouncements concerning that very thing--character in tragedy--have, through the ages, been considered important.

CHAPTER II

HISTORICAL SKETCH OF THE POETICS

Up to the beginning of the thirteenth century, only the Aristotelian logical treatise, the Organon, was known in western Europe. About 1200, the "new Aristotle" began to arrive by numerous and devious routes: he was accepted as the authority on many things, logic and the other arts of the trivium and quadrivium, for instance, but his treatise on the art of poetry was neglected by the Middle Ages.

Why might this be?

Aristotle wrote at the end of an age: the products of Attic culture had reached their height and the decline had set in. He was far enough removed from the Periclean Age to be able to criticize it, and yet close enough to understand it. Even in his own day, the old order was fast changing and the unity of Greek life was disrupted: even the entertainments had changed. In the hurly burly of circus and pantomime, the cosmopolitan mobs of Rome could not see the same life and art that the Athenians saw in the Theatre of Dionysius. The early Christian fathers were prejudiced against the theatre, and the barbarian hordes that swept over the Roman Empire increased the confusion of a life already too turbulent. This was scarcely the time, nor was

it the atmosphere, for the application of what Gassner calls "a way of looking equally at art and humanity as objects of rational inquiry and ideal expectations."¹ So, although Europe was discovering his other work, Aristotle's theory of poetry was fairly untouched.

In England, Roger Bacon (1214?-1294), who was the first Englishman to mention the Poetics, says he had difficulty obtaining the classical writings. St. Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274) fostered the first medieval Latin translation of Aristotle, direct from the Greek. Chaucer, in his "Monk's Prolog" had included a medieval definition of tragedy which probably went back to Aristotle, ultimately, although it did differ.

Gradually, at the end of the 15th century, travel to the continent became more frequent, as did the interest in classical writings which Bacon had desired. In fact, in 1530, Roger Ascham went to Cambridge and wrote that they were reading Plato and Aristotle in the Original. In view of Ascham's testimony and of other evidence that scholars, both on the continent and in England, were deeply interested in Greek literature, Professor Herrick thinks we can be fairly safe in saying that the Poetics was probably known at Cambridge by 1542 if not before.²

¹John Gassner, "Aristotelian Literary Criticism," in Aristotle's Theory of Poetry and Fine Art (Dover, 1951), p. xxxviii.

²Marvin Theodore Herrick, The Poetics of Aristotle in

During that sixteenth century, the Poetice had come to Oxford, too. In 1574, for instance, Sir Philip Sidney wrote his tutor about a desire to master Greek so that he might read Aristotle in the original. Although it was not until 1623, the date of publication of The Duchess of Malfi, that Theodore Goulston published a translation of the Poetice from an English press, by the end of that sixteenth century, Aristotle was already "in the air."

Webster, then, could have known of the Poetice, could have discussed this theory of drama in some of the gatherings of the day where such matters are often said to have been the subject of informal discussion. A brief look at the England of Webster's day, at some of the conventions and practices of the life and the drama leads one to believe, however, that knowledge of the existence of this code would have made little difference in Webster's dramaturgy. He was not trying to match a classic standard when he wrote. Lucas says Aristotle was "little thumbed on the Bank Side,"¹ referring, of course, to the side of the river Thames where the theatre groups met and produced their plays. The truth of that observation has, as its basis, a psychological

England (New Haven, 1930), p. 17. Aside from that very dubious reference to it by Bacon in the thirteenth century, the first reference to it by an Englishman was in 1555 by Ascham.

¹ F. L. Lucas, The Works of John Webster, I (London, 1927), 19.

understanding of the times, the theatre and production conditions, and the audience.

There are some things which can be predicated of the people of this time, generally, to be sure. Exploration-Experiment-Study-Travel were bywords of Renaissance man. He devoured and admired the Greek and Roman Classics as they were made available to him; he was attracted by Italian and French culture--and stories; he wanted to be entertained when he saw a play, and he demanded certain things of his theatre; he had, also, not long before, watched and identified himself with the struggles of an Everyman on a stage not unlike the one where he now saw a Faustus or a Lear. He, and others like him, made up the audience of the Elizabethan theatre. More or less of one of the ingredients of the above formula for Renaissance man made him a prince or a groundling. John A. Symonds thinks it was through the drama in England that the Renaissance mainly expressed itself.¹

John Webster and his contemporaries were writing ("composing" is a more apt expression for they often wrote, inserted and changed lines by word of mouth, recording them only later), plays for a living audience who would quickly set a standard of judgment for the plays they watched--that standard being their own satisfaction. An Elizabethan might hear some modern critic

¹ John Addington Symonds, Shakespeare's Predecessors in the English Drama (London, 1884), p. 25.

rationalize an inconsistency within a play and say "That's nice," but it would not really have mattered much to him. Certain conventions (such as a sense of double time), his willing suspension of disbelief, and the physical conditions of the Elizabethan theatre made it easy for the theatre-goer to set demands for realism and consistency aside in favor of the eternal privilege of the theatre-goer--enjoyment.

On this matter, Lucas says:

Elizabethan plays would doubtless be far better had a little more logic and good sense gone to their making; but one cannot have everything. Webster himself, indeed, was, in theory, on the side of William Archer and against his own practice, so that the modern critic might well have shown the dramatist a little more indulgence in consideration of that Preface to The White Devil where Webster complains so bitterly that it was waste of labour to write well-made and classical plays for the incapable multitude. The playwright had to live; and it is ironic to reflect that, but for that happy accident, his work would probably have died with him.¹

The Elizabethans were not worried much about classical standards, then, or perfectly constructed plays. They might be the first to admit this. They were writing good poetry and in many cases good drama. They were writing for a living audience.

Just what an effect this audience had upon the dramatist is a matter for study in itself. Certainly the audience at the Globe or the Swan influenced their dramatists. However, every device or line which seems incompatible with present standards

¹ Lucas, Works, I, 19-20.

of dramaturgy cannot be explained away by a remark like "That was for the groundlings." This has been a tendency of some critics. The fact is that there were groundlings there, but there were educated men, also, as well as other dramatists.

(That was in the days before every man was categorized according to his job and expected to limit himself to one particular field of endeavor, leaving such things as drama to the "specialists." In that time, the very man next to one at the theatre might some day write a play!) Some of the benefits of writing for such a theatre were pointed out by John Masefield in his recent book--long discussion of the events and people and ideas which had influenced his development as a writer. He tells of how, laboring under a self-administered apprenticeship, writing--writing--writing--on his own, he had yearned for the opportunity the Elizabethans had had to work in companies, to be stimulated by their fellow dramatists, and to write for a living group. He used to think of how the poets had been a necessary part of the acting companies, how they had danced, played and drunk with their fellows and had written the plays. Surely there must have been always, in the poet's mind, he thought, the inner knowledge of what each man should be given to do.¹

Considering this sketch of the promulgation of the Poetics

¹ John Masefield, So Long To Learn (New York, 1952), pp. 130, 131.

and the brief view of the drama of Elizabethan England for which Webster wrote, it is obvious that he may or may not have been familiar with the yardstick which is being used to measure his plays. If the instrument of measurement, the Poetics, was known to the dramatist, it was not likely to be closely heeded.

If, then, living and writing twenty centuries after Aristotle, John Webster approximated in any way Aristotle's type of the tragic hero, this would seem to be re-affirmation of the universality of the Stagirite's standard.

CHAPTER III

ARISTOTLE'S THEORIES CONCERNING CHARACTER IN TRAGEDY

After sketching the history of the progressive promulgation of the Poetics and introducing the world in which John Webster lived and wrote, a statement of just exactly what Aristotle says of character in his critical document is in order. It is well to note, immediately, that Aristotle considers plot the most important matter of tragedy since it is by man's actions that he is made happy or unhappy. Character is closely related to plot, however: this relationship is made manifest in one sentence from Lane Cooper's text of the Poetics:

Tragedy is an imitation of an action: mainly on account of this action does it become, in the second place, an imitation of personal agents.¹

Character, then, to Aristotle, is in second place: this does not mean that it is unimportant. The distinction yet connection of character and action is adequately expressed in Butcher's translation of the Poetics.²

¹ Lane Cooper, Aristotle on the Art of Poetry (New York, 1913), p. 26.

² Samuel T. Butcher, Aristotle's Theory of Poetry and Fine

In this edition, Butcher quotes Aristotle's statements on character as related to action as follows:

Again, Tragedy is the imitation of an action; and an action implies personal agents, who necessarily possess certain distinctive qualities both of character and thought: for it is by these that we qualify actions themselves, and these--thought and character--are the two natural causes from which actions spring, and on actions again all success or failure depends.¹

So, although tragedy is the imitation of action, character as the director of that action is indispensable to it. Thus, a study of character is not a digression from the essential matter of tragedy.

This dramatic delineation of character is not done without art. Aristotle seems to express the idea that one cannot just relate what one sees around him: a certain discrimination must be employed in choosing the objects of imitation. Aristotle says:

Since the objects of imitation are men in action, and these men must be either of a higher or lower type (for moral character mainly answers to these divisions, goodness and badness being the distinguishing marks of moral differences), it follows that we must represent men either as better than in real life, or as worse, or as they are. It is the same in painting. Polygnotus depicted men as nobler

Art (With a Critical Text and Translation of the Poetics), New York, 1951.

Any quotations from or paraphrases of the Poetics given henceforth in this paper will be taken from or agree with this edition, unless it is otherwise stated.

¹Butcher, Poetics, p. 25.

than they are, Pauson as less noble, Dionysius drew them true to life.¹

If the characters imitated must be either of a higher or lower type and if, in order to fit more readily into either of those two categories, they must be portrayed as better or as worse than in actual life, it is necessary to decide which kind of portrayal is appropriate to tragedy. Aristotle says that "Comedy aims at representing man as worse, Tragedy as better than in actual life."²

To some extent, a tragic character is "idealized." This is a process familiar to observers of the arts, especially painting. A good portrait painter reproduces the distinctive form of the original, making a likeness which is true to life yet more beautiful. If a man has a defect of countenance, for instance, the portrait painter does not ignore but includes it as part of the whole picture of the man. At the same time, he tries, in the painting, to ennoble or idealize the subject.

Up to this point, it has been extracted from Aristotle that a tragic character must be of a type higher than the average. He must be portrayed as he is, with his defects; at the same time he is idealized or given a certain magnificence by an ennobling portrayal. Although it is by his actions that he is made happy

¹Ibid., p. 11.

²Ibid., p. 13.

or unhappy, they spring partially from his character. Now, Aristotle defines character according to its expression in qualities and choices. He says it is "that in virtue of which we ascribe certain qualities to the agents." He develops this idea stating that "Character is that which reveals moral purpose, showing what kind of things^a man chooses or avoids."¹ It is, then, definitely, the source of action.

Without detailed treatment of why this appropriate source of action and qualities is not present in certain familiar dramatis personae, he eliminates them one by one from his discussion. Aristotle states that their actions could not possibly bring the proper results of tragedy--catharsis of the emotions of pity and fear.

He says:

It follows plainly, in the first place, that the change of fortune presented must not be the spectacle of a virtuous man brought from prosperity to adversity: for this moves neither pity nor fear; it merely shocks us. Nor, again, that of a bad man passing from adversity to prosperity: for nothing can be more alien to the spirit of Tragedy; it possesses no single tragic quality; it neither satisfies the moral sense nor calls forth pity or fear. Nor, again, should the downfall of the utter villain be exhibited. A plot of this kind would, doubtless, satisfy the moral sense, but it would inspire neither pity nor fear; for pity is aroused by unmerited misfortune, fear by the misfortune of a man like ourselves. Such an event, therefore, will be neither pitiful nor terrible.²

¹Ibid., p. 29.

²Ibid., p. 45.

Since the tragic character may not be the completely virtuous man, suffering a downfall, nor the thoroughly bad man experiencing advancement or decline, Aristotle draws the character which remains, the one who qualifies as the tragic hero:

There remains, then, the character between these two extremes,--that of a man who is not eminently good and just, yet whose misfortune is brought about not by vice or depravity, but by some error or frailty. He must be one who is highly renowned and prosperous,--a personage like Oedipus, Thyestes, or other illustrious men of such families.¹

Aristotle then enumerates the qualities which the character of the tragic hero must possess.

In respect of Character there are four things to be aimed at. First, and most important, it must be good. Now any speech or action that manifests moral purpose of any kind will be expressive of character: the character will be good if the purpose is good. This rule is relative to each class. Even a woman may be good, and also a slave; though the woman may be said to be an inferior being, and the slave quite worthless. The second thing to aim at is propriety. There is a type of manly valour; but valour in a woman, or unscrupulous cleverness, is inappropriate. Thirdly, character must be true to life: for this is a distinct thing from goodness and propriety, as here described. The fourth point is consistency: for though the subject of the imitation, who suggested the type be inconsistent, still he must be consistently inconsistent. As an example of motiveless degradation of character, we have Menelaus in the Orestes: of character indecorous and inappropriate, the lament of Odysseus in the Scylla, and the speech of Melanippe: of inconsistency, the Iphigenia at Aulis--for Iphigenia the suppliant in her way resembles her later self.²

These qualities enumerated above will form the basis of this

¹Ibid., pp. 45, 47.

²Ibid., pp. 53 and 55.

thesis. They are the traits of the tragic hero: an attempt will be made to evaluate Webster's characters in relation to this four-quality standard of goodness, propriety, consistency, and truth to life.

A brief discussion of each trait implements understanding of terminology.

Within the ideas of "good" and tragic flaw or hamartia, there is room for comment and some discussion. The ordinary meaning of the word "good" itself has been challenged. Does a different standard of moral goodness, prevalent in the pagan world from which Aristotle wrote, impart connotations to that term which make our accepted meaning of "moral integrity" incomplete? While some have posited the word "magnificent" as a synonym for the kind of goodness which Aristotle mentions, critics almost universally have thought of that term as referring to moral goodness, as we would accept it.

Lucas says that Aristotle divides tragedy into two classes: those that have the peripetoeia and those that have not. Within that first category, that including the peripetoeia--which is the fatal working to a result the opposite of what was intended--there is this hamartia or tragic error which causes it. This may or may not be moral: it may be an intellectual error, just an inability to see into the future, as with Desdemona and

Duncan.¹ The second kind of tragedy is that of simple circumstance such as that of the Trojan women or Euripides. This latter type is of little concern here since we are studying character in tragedy, and thus will emphasize the statements concerning tragedy caused by character, not those arising from circumstance. Lucas later qualifies his comment upon the tragic flaw when he says: "For, though it is clear that the tragic error need not be moral, it is equally clear that it very often has been."² Looking backward from Aristotle to some of the Greek plays, and then forward even to the semi-tragic episodes within the medieval drama, extending this view on to the Doctors Faustus and the Lears and even to the heroes of twentieth century dramas like Detective Story, one sees that, to most men, in life or its dramatic imitation, the tragedy has been greater when caused by self.

It was recently commented by a religious writer that, in this view of tragedy, the Greeks' gaze was a penetrating one. To them, misfortune of itself was not the greatest tragedy: it was the misfortune brought about by man's own mistakes which invites disaster and is, therefore, most piteous. This has a relationship to the Christian attitude: within the Christian dis-

¹F. L. Lucas, Tragedy in Relation to Aristotle's Poetics (London, 1928), p. 100.

²Ibid.

pensation, misfortune of itself is not evil except, philosophically, insofar as it is a privation of a perfection. The use of sorrow can make it glorious. It is the blindness of sin which makes man a creature in which we recognize our own weakness, and then pity him.¹

The tragic character must not only be good, but he or she must be proprietary. In a play in which the protagonist is a woman, this is especially important. Aristotle says that manly valour in a woman, or unscrupulous cleverness, is inappropriate. The character should be true to the spectators' idea of the demands of such a person of this sex, rank, etc. Propriety includes the idea of suitability of action to the characters' sex, age, station, etc.

A tragic personage must be true to life, according to Aristotle. Aristotle points out some distinctions between history and poetry which are a necessary antecedent to this discussion. He says the historian's job is to record and relate the particular, while it is the poet's task to express the universal. He is meant to tell not so much what did happen in a particular situation as what is bound to happen. He should aim at portraying the type or universal, even when he attaches a specific name to a personage.

¹Vincent P. McGorry, S.J., "The Word," America, XCI (Aug. 7, 1954), No. 19, 466.

This "truth to life" as perceived by the reader, is not our belief that we will meet the counterpart of one of these characters in the actual world. They are idealized, they are part of a "higher reality," as Butcher tells us, what "ought to be, not what is." The characters of the dramatist are unreal only in that they surpass reality. They are not untrue to nature or her ideal tendencies.¹

A character must be consistent to the person he has been made out to be. Homer portrayed Achilles as consistently inconsistent, but that treatment is wholly acceptable. The character should operate according to the nature which the playwright has attributed to him. It is against a complete change of quality that Aristotle militates here, not against growth or degradation as a result of submission to a flaw. As an example, he cites the Iphigenia at Aulis, for Iphigenia the suppliant in no way resembles her later self.

Having considered what Aristotle said of Character, and having treated some of the reasons for and methods of portraying a tragic hero as good, propitious, true to life and consistent, an examination of Webster's important dramatis personae is the next step. A detailed scrutiny of the protagonists, Vittoria Corombona and Duchess of Malfi, and a less detailed examination

¹Butcher, "Poetic Truth," p. 168.

of the lesser characters in the light of this standard will reveal if Webster's in any way approximated the Aristotelian tragic character.

CHAPTER IV

APPLICATION OF ARISTOTLE'S THEORIES CONCERNING CHARACTER TO THE WHITE DEVIL AND THE DUCHESS OF MALFI

A. Vittoria Corombona as Tragic Heroine

Wee will no more admire Euripides
Nor praise the Tragickstreines of Sophocles,
For why? thou in this Tragedie has fram'd
All reall worth that can in them be nam'd.

This is the epigrammatic tribute offered to Mr. John Webster by his contemporary, Samuel Sheppard, for the former's composition of The White Devil.¹ The statement is especially pertinent to this present study which is an attempt to evaluate the characters of that drama and The Duchess of Malfi, in terms of the critic Aristotle, who observed those very classic plays mentioned above when forming his own standard of dramaturgy.

In the two plays which are the subject of this study, the protagonists are women. When Aristotle discussed the quality of "goodness" in a tragic character, he remarked that this quality is relative to class. He said: "Even a woman may be good, and

¹Appeared in Epigrams (theological, philosophical and romantic 1651), quoted in Clifford Leech, John Webster: A Critical Study (London, 1951), p. 3.

also a slave; though the woman may be said to be an inferior being and the slave quite worthless."¹

Obviously, then, he was not regarding women as the usual protagonists of tragedy. Aristotle goes into detail regarding the idealization employed in characterization of the tragic hero and this is hardly compatible with the statement quoted above. It is surprising, however, that the Greek critic dismissed women so summarily and in such a manner as to exclude them from the dignity of protagonist, for within the very drama upon which he based his observations, examples of women as the main characters can be found.

However, since in these tragedies of John Webster the women who give the plays their titles are most important, it is necessary that the qualities assigned by Aristotle to the tragic hero be applied to the heroine in each case.

The portrayal of women in the leading positions is not exclusively John Webster's practice, but his treatment of the feminine characters in his plays is somewhat different from that of many of his fellow dramatists. Edmonds, viewing him in relation to his contemporaries, says his women, unlike the female characters of Kyd, Tourneur and Marston, are important.

They are made the central figures of the plays, the target at which all the poisoned arrows are aimed. Their intense suffering as a result of many cross motives makes these plays

¹Butcher, Poetics, p. 53.

reek far more with the atmosphere of horror than the others with their pitiable male characters suffering from persecutions.¹

The White Devil or Vittoria Corombona was presented probably in 1612, and not too well received. At first, Webster says it was "acted in so dull a time of winter, presented in so open and black a theatre that it wanted (that which is the only grace and setting-out of a tragedy) a full and understanding auditory."²

It is based upon a tragedy of real-life Italy, although Webster's version often does not follow the original account accurately. Just how the author received the facts upon which he built his play is not definite; his editor Lucas says the source may have been written or oral.³ He is inclined to think it was oral. The story is as follows:

Vittoria Corombona, wife of Camillo, who is the nephew of Cardinal Monticelso, is loved by the Duke of Brachiano. Encouraged by Vittoria's pander-brother, Flamineo, and incited by Vittoria herself, Brachiano has her husband and his wife Isabella murdered. Vittoria is brought to trial for murder and adultery before Cardinal Monticelso and Francisco de Medici, Duke of

¹Sheppard R. Edmonds, The Tragic Atmosphere of John Webster. M.A. Thesis, Columbia University, 1933, p. 44.

²John Webster, "To The Reader," quoted in Webster and Tourneur, ed. by Felix E. Schelling (New York, 1912), p. 28.

³Lucas, Works, I, 85. Note: Henceforth, in this study, all quotations from the plays will be taken from this edition, Vols. I and II.

Florence, who was also Isabella's brother. She skillfully defends herself at the trial but is sentenced to residence in a house of convertites or penitent whores, from whence she is rescued by Brachiano, who takes her to Padua and marries her. The Cardinal, her judge at the trial, hears of her escape just after he is elected Pope and his first official act is to excommunicate her and Brachiano. Francisco had vowed to avenge his sister's death and he is joined by the outlaw Lodovico who, at the start of the play, secretly loved Isabella. At Padua, disguised as Capuchin monks, Lodovico and his henchman Gasparo poison the helmet of Brachiano and taunt him on his death-bed.

Meanwhile, Flameneo has killed his innocent brother Marcello in a brawl, an act which has almost driven their mother mad. She curses him and his sister for their projected evil. Now he wishes to be rewarded by Vittoria, Brachiano's widow, and tries to blackmail her. When Flameneo sees that he will get no prize from his sister for his nefarious deeds, he announces his intention to kill her; however, she and her maid try to outwit and kill him. The revenger, Lodovico, aided by Gasparo, storm in and, to complete their revenge, kill Vittoria, her maid, and Flameneo. They are interrupted by the appearance of Giovanni, orphan-prince and son of Isabella and Brachiano, who represents the cause of legitimate rule and justice. He orders the revengers imprisoned and assumes command.

1. Is Vittoria Corombona "Good"?

The title provides the name of the protagonist. A consideration of Vittoria Corombona's delineation in the light of the characteristics which Aristotle predicated of the tragic hero should begin with a discussion of her "goodness." With her third line, Vittoria prepares the audience for her subsequent separation from the realm of goodness. In the second scene of the play, Flameneo is twitting Camillo, driving him to lock himself in his own chamber that night, thus insuring the love-making of Vittoria and Brachiano. She says, aside, to Flameneo, "How shals rid him hence?"¹ This line shows that she is anxious to get her husband out of the way: the reason, of course, is that she wishes to meet her lover Brachiano. The line, however, carries suggestion of a deeper significance which becomes clear only later when Vittoria's character has been more revealingly detailed. Soon the audience knows that not only does she wish him out of the way momentarily, but permanently as well.

When Camillo leaves, she coyly encourages Brachiano in his unlawful pursuit of her love. He has just said that he will be lost without her. She remarks:

Sure Sir a loathed crueltie in Ladyes
Is as to Doctors many funeralls:
It takes away their credit.²

¹Lucas, Works, I, 117.

²Ibid., p. 118.

Thus, she illustrates that she yields to his avowals of undying ardor. Within a moment, Zanche, her waiting woman, describes their embrace: "See now they close" and Flamineo, with customary irony, drolls, "Most happy union."¹ Before Vittoria makes her second entrance (the first having been time only for her brief formal welcome of Brachiano to the palace), Flamineo had prepared the audience for this first moral transgression which she perpetrates in the play. He has told Brachiano that she accepts his love although she is married to Camillo, asking Brachiano if he did not notice how Vittoria had taken pains to cast her eyes upon him in that moment when she greeted him at the opening of the play.

At first opportunity Vittoria recounts to Brachiano a dream which she allegedly had. It contains the idea for her husband's death as well as for that of Brachiano's duchess. Nonchalantly she proposes a most sinister act; Vittoria says:

Methought I walkt about the mid of night,
 Into a Church-yard, where a goodly Eu Tree
 Spred her large roote in ground-under that Eu,
 As I sat sadly leaning on a grave,
 Checkered with Crosse-sticks, their came stealing in
 Your Dutchesse, and my husband--one of them
 A picax bore, thi other a Rusty spade,
 And in rough termes they gan to challenge me
 About this Eu.

Brachiano asks, "That Tree?"

Vittoria answers:

¹Ibid.

This harmless Eu
 They told me my entent was to root up
 That well-growne Eu, and plant i' the steed of it,
 A withered blacke-thorne, and for that they vow'd
 To bury me alive:

 When to²my rescue there arose, methought,
 A Whirlwind which let fall a massy arme
 From that strong plant;
 And both were struck²dead by that sacred Eu.
 In that base shallow grave that was their due.¹

Flammineo evaluates her vision of the ewe which, of course, represents Brachiano. When she concludes with the remark that for all her terror she could not pray, he says:

No, the divell was in your dreame.²

The devil indeed was in this dream in which Vittoria portrays herself as harmless, preyed upon by the very ones upon whose rights she is about to trample. Here, as later on in the trial scene, she cloaks her own deeds with a covering of white with a boldness which Charles Lamb described as "innocence-resembling."

Toward the close of Act I, Vittoria's own mother, who has overheard the love scene between her daughter and Brachiano, sets the seal upon her daughter's moral depravity when she utters a prophecy and curses her soundly. Cornelia says:

If thou dishonour thus thy husband's bed,

¹Ibid., pp. 118, 119.

²Ibid., p. 119.

See thy life short as are the funerall teares
in great mens . . .¹

Webster cleverly paints her evil in an even blacker light by contrasting, in the next scene, the goodness of Isabella, wronged wife of Brachiano, who responds to rejection by her husband by wishing him final peace. Isabella says:

O my unkind Lord, may your sins find mercy,
As I upon a woefull widowed bed,
Shall pray for you, if not to turne your eyes
Upon your wretched wife, and hopefull sonne,²
Yet that in time you'll fix them upon heaven.

Isabella even makes the renunciation of spouse seem her own doing rather than Brachiano's. She says for those present to hear:

Henceforth I'll never lye with you, by this
This wedding-ring.³

Far from taking upon herself the blame of another as did Isabella, Vittoria, having just given Brachiano the idea for killing her husband and his duchess, excuses herself. She pleads that Brachiano insisted upon her love. She could not do else but yield. She says:

I do protest if any chaste deniall,
If any thing but bloud could have alayed
His long suite to me . . .⁴

¹Ibid., p. 120.

²Ibid., p. 127.

³Ibid., p. 128.

⁴Ibid., p. 120.

In these lines and in the one following, where she acknowledges the horror of being cursed by a parent, Vittoria acknowledges her evil intent and actions. In the first of the above-quoted lines, she denies the ability to choose what is right in spite of temptation. This is in direct contrast to her power of self-direction generally exhibited in the play. In her very next line, the one in which she recognizes and fears the curse, Vittoria looks hard at her own guilt and is terrified by it. She runs from the room shouting, "O me accurst!"¹

Deception is Vittoria's stock in trade. Her claim to the epithet "evil" lies not so much in the transgressions as in her deception concerning them. In the courtroom scene, Vittoria argues for her innocence of the charges eloquently. Had one not met her before, he might well have been convinced--or deceived,--rather,--by her performance. When the Cardinal remarks that she comes not like a widow, but, rather, armed with scorn and impudence, she responds that had she known she was to be a widow as he suggests, she would have prepared her mourning. To the very end when she leaves the courtroom calling, "A rape, a rape. . . . Yes, you have ravisht justice,"² she maintains this innocence.

¹ Ibid., p. 120.

² Ibid., p. 144.

Throughout the remainder of the play, Vittoria merits the title with which Webster originally endowed her--"white devil." Her flight from the house of convertites with Brachiano and her future life with him do nothing to relieve this judgment. In the final scene, she refuses Flamineo any reward for his services except "that portion . . . and no other which Cain ground under, having slain his brother."¹ and he, testing her further, allows her to shoot him with false bullets. He feigns death: she and her maid sadistically tread upon him. Her character has not changed at all. She is the same bold, defiant, evil Vittoria, and she admits as much in one of her final speeches:

My soule, like to a ship in a black storme,
Is driven I know not whither.²

Vittoria, then, though idealized, is never presented as a good character, in the Aristotelian sense. The critics have generally recognized this.

Leech says Webster, in the courtroom scene, and in others throughout the play, leaves us with the impression of a brave spirit who has beauty and adroitness. Outside of the orbit of goodness, he definitely does recognize her distance from it. "It is an imagined unreachable heaven in the darkness of Hell. She is one of the damned and a source of damnation. Knowing this, the

¹Ibid., p. 184.

²Ibid., p. 190.

dramatist does honor to his white devil."¹

However, Webster's idea is not to subterfuge the evil within some of his characters. One writer who has investigated "The Tragic Atmosphere of John Webster" says the thing that is different about Webster's characters and those of other playwrights is that Webster's are bad to begin with but, as they draw nearer to the inevitable, we have a kind of sympathy with them.²

Vittoria's vices are far deeper than the defects caught by the portrait painter or the faults of a fundamentally good person. Truly she merits her title of "white devil." Developing further the idea that Webster dignifies his characters, even though they are not admirable, Bowers comments:

Webster took advantage of the fact that a villain as protagonist will receive sympathy if the audience is not morally disgusted by his unallayed and unromantic depravity, and if the other prominent persons are not sufficiently virtuous or interesting to ally the audience on their side against the protagonist.³

Whether or not that statement is generally true, it describes what has happened to the many who have been gripped by Vittoria. As far as her actual moral stature is concerned, she is revealed by other characters, by her own words and by personal actions as a basically depraved, lascivious person. This attitude which others

¹Leech, John Webster: A Critical Study, p. 44.

²Edmonds, The Tragic Atmosphere of John Webster, pp. 141-2.

³Fredson Thayer Bowers, Elizabethan Revenge Tragedy, 1587-1642 (Princeton, 1940), p. 181.

take toward Vittoria, revealing her character before her own words and actions can do so, provide a vision of an evil woman for the audience. Her acquiescence to the advances of a lover not her husband, her suggestion that the lover get rid of the two obstacles to their love--her husband and his wife--confirm this image of a corrupt character. Her subsequent behavior completes the picture of the heroine of the play named so graphically for her.

Aristotle envisioned a chief character as one in whom people could find prototypes of themselves. He even dismissed a totally evil character as one inappropriate to the ends of tragedy. That the delineation of Vittoria's character is incongruous to Aristotle's conception of a character generally good but possessing a flaw or flaws is best exemplified by a few bits of her dialog. Phrases in which she protests innocence like "Summe up my faults . . ." and "My modesty and womanhood I tender . . ." become words of recognition of guilt like "I am lost forever," and one of her final speeches in which she summarizes the results of her life is

My soule, like to a ship in a black storme,
Is driven I know not whither.¹

¹ Lucas, Works, I, 190.

2. The Propriety of the "White Devil"

Application of Aristotle's second enumerated quality, that of propriety, to Vittoria seems at first more difficult than was "goodness." Accepting the ordinary definition of propriety as meaning "suitable" or "fitting," successive statements of Aristotle make it obvious that he is emphasizing the idea of propriety to the character's own sex.

Aristotle says: "There is a type of manly valour; but valour in a woman, or unscrupulous cleverness, is inappropriate."¹ At first glance, Vittoria's pursuit of her own ends, regardless of Divine and positive law, might seem to be an example of unscrupulous cleverness. As the play advances, however, it becomes clear that her wilfulness does not contradict her femininity, and it was that which the Greek critic was legislating against.

True, it is not womanly virtue but its distortion which is Vittoria's practice, but when she asserts herself in the memorable trial scene, she is not pitting unwomanly strength against her accusers; rather it is "feminine wiles" which she employs. She stands there before the court with flushed cheek and colorful dress. Vittoria indirectly calls upon their chivalry and directs sympathy to her feminine weakness by apologizing for the defense of herself which must seem almost masculine. She says:

¹ Butcher, Poetics, p. 53.

Humbly thus,
 Thus low, to the most worthy and respected
 Leigier Embassadors, my modesty
 And womanhood I tender; but withall
 So intengled in a cursed accusation
 That my defence of force like Perseus,
 Must personate masculine virtue--¹

Later, when Brachiano visits her at the house of Convertites to which she has been sentenced, Vittoria, with her tears, helps Flamineo drive him to the point where he offers to marry and make her a duchess. Brachiano summarizes her position when he says to her, in that scene:

Your beautie! O, ten thousand curses on't.
 How long have I beheld the devill in christall!
 Thou has lead mee, like an heathen sacrifice,
 With musicke, and with fatall yokes of flowers
 To my eternall ruine. Woman to man
 Is either a God or a wolfe,²

Vittoria is the instigator, the motivating force, the source of the temptation to his evil deeds. Hers is the place accorded woman throughout history and literature: she is the strength or the ruin of the men who love her. From the age when the walls of Troy held fast, enclosing the beautiful stolen prize, Helen, woman has filled the role of ideal or siren, inspiring man to worthwhile achievement, or luring him to his destruction.

True to Brachiano's statement, Vittoria does bring him closer to his own ruin in this scene laid in the house of Con-

¹ Lucas, Works, I, 140.

² Ibid., p. 156.

vertites. At one point, she throws herself upon a bed, weeping, and says to Brachiano:

I, I, your good heart gathers like a snow-ball.
Now your affection's cold.¹

He soon yields to the lugubrious treatment and tells Flamineo to take Vittoria, their old mother, and possibly their brother Marcello, and meet him in Padua.

Hers is a distorted femininity, insofar as womanhood should have been the perfection of herself according to her nature, but still she is every inch the female. The tragic character, in this case, has not had to put aside her sex because she is the heroine of a tragedy. Rather, Vittoria makes use of that fact, giving the men with whom she is connected encouragement, here, and, at another time, a prod.

Really, it is the presence of the character Flamineo in the play which enables Vittoria to maintain the aloofness appropriate to her sex. He performs most of the nefarious manipulations for her, leaving her free to be temptress and beautiful villainess. In the scene in the House of Convertites, for instance, he seems to be impartially moderating the reconciliation between his sister and Brachiano. Actually, he is working Brachiano around to precisely the point where Vittoria wants him, with lines like this one directed to Vittoria:

¹ Ibid., p. 158.

Marke his penitence
 Best natures doe commit the grossest faultes,
 When they're giv'n ore to jealousie; as best wine
 Dying makes strongest vinneger.¹

- A little later in the conversation, he prods Brachiano:

Stop her mouth with a sweet kisse, my Lord
 So—now the tide's turned the vessel's come about.²

In the final scene of the play, Vittoria shows fright, appropriately: she refuses Flamineo any reward for his services and he threatens to kill her. She throws her words at Flamineo to delay him while she says, aside, to her maid:

Cry out for helpe!³

Then, when she offers more arguments to Flamineo as to why he should think over what he intends to do, he calls hers "feminine arguments." Feminine arguments they are, truly: only a few minutes later when they have been interrupted by the revengers, she makes one last desperate attempt to enable her beauty to save her. She says:

If Florence be ith Court, would hee kill mee!⁴

Her genuine terror in this scene, when first confronted with death, makes Vittoria more believable, and, thus, more appropriate

¹Ibid.

²Ibid.

³Ibid., p. 185.

⁴Ibid., p. 189.

or propriatous to her sex. When the revenger, Lodovico, remarks in this final scene that she trembles and that he would think her fears would dissolve her into air, she answers:

O thou art deceived, I am too true a woman:
Conceit can never kill me.¹

When the actual death blows are dealt by the revengers, she is brave. While Flamineo calls hers "masculine virtue," at no time does Vittoria Corombona seem not to be every inch a woman, and thus "propriatous" in the Aristotelian sense.

3. Was the "White Devil" True to Life?

The decision that Vittoria is evil, yet that her conduct is generally propriatous, leads directly to Aristotle's next enumerated quality of the tragic character--truth to life. Was Vittoria portrayed as so relentlessly evil that she could not be real? Was she too black to be convincing? After all, she, as Helen of Troy, was the cause of the conflict and holocaust. It was her beauty which she willingly allowed her brother to pander and which won Brachiano away from his rightful spouse. To say this is not to deny the self-direction of the other characters but merely to grant her central place in a drama in which she is often not present on stage. She is not a good woman possessing a tragic flaw: she, herself, has all the calculating ambition of Macbeth's spouse, the slavery to sense of which Hamlet accuses his mother,

¹Ibid., p. 190.

but the intensity (though none of the goodness) of Portia arguing against Shylock's demand of the pound of flesh. A glamour enfolds her throughout the play. Bowers says: "It is her play and she invests it with a magnificence to which no audience can be cold."¹

Really, Webster has idealized her to the greatest degree, all the while recognizing her duplicity. She appears in the court scene, "with gleaming golden hair twisted into snakelike braids about her temples, with skin white as cream, bright cheeks, dark dauntless eye and, on her bosom, where it has been chafed by jewelled chains, a flush of rose."²

The statement that one grows in sympathy for Webster's characters, though they are portrayed, in general, as bad, applies to Vittoria. She is the "white devil" but she, at least, seems human, unlike her brother, Flamineo, who rather more than his sister resembles, sometimes, a character on lend-lease from the nether regions. She has doubts: her boldness of demeanor at the trial scene is made more believable because she is seen to flinch under her mother's curse and will again, in the last act, when Flamineo threatens her.

Although the factual account upon which her story was based

¹Bowers, Elizabethan Revenge Tragedy, 1587-1642, p. 181.

²John Addington Symonds, Italian Byways (London, 1883), pp. 176, 177.

has certainly been much altered, Vittoria is, still, definitely true to life within her world. It is upon that last phrase "within her world" that a cause for comment arises, however. Webster created a world, and it is only against that background that his character, Vittoria, could be real or true to life. It is here, too, that Webster's violation of Aristotle's demand can be seen, for the world Webster creates is not the real one. He succeeds, as even the author of Macbeth could not, in creating a mood of bloody death, dark night, and sinister plots which can survive the air only at midnight. Another reason for the blood and violence is that it belongs to the general category of revenge plays.

Revenge, if one comprehends the whole idea of it, was the subject of all Elizabethan tragedy, Bowers thinks. He says the three-fold aspect of revenge must be reckoned as including God's revenge, public revenge committed to the rulers by God, and private revenge forbidden alike by God and by the state as his representative. However, in its characterization, the White Devil is even an extreme presentation of this idea. Vittoria is a villainess herself, married ultimately to the villain Brachiano. She is the protagonist, although the very complication of characters sometimes seems to obscure her in favor of avenger-villain, villain-pander, villain-lover and so on, "ad infinitum."

Her world is one of darkness and death. It is part of

Webster's dark genius that his examples of lofty diction and especially connotative imagery are linked with his portrayal of death and its accompaniments. One of the loveliest pieces of poetry in the play is Cornelia's funeral dirge over the body of her son Marcello which begins:

Call for the robin-red-breast and the wren
 Since o'er shady groves they hover
 And with leaves and flowers do cover
 The friendless bodies of unburied men.¹

When Webster's characters speak, their imagery is most often the imagery of the grave. Flameneo, discussing Camillo's death with Brachiano in the second act says:

Remember this, you slave; when knaves come to preferment,
 they rise as gallowses are raised i' the Low Countries, one
 upon another's shoulders.²

At another time he says:

You speak as if a man
 Should know what fowl is confined in a baked meat
 Afore you cut it open.³

The lens through which Webster looked at life was limited in size and shadowed: his genius was a narrow though a great one. He dipped into the depths of despair and painted life with liquid the color of night and bearing the haunting aroma of death.

His was a voice of the late Renaissance, the "withering

¹ Lucas, Works, I, 182.

² Ibid., p. 130.

³ Ibid., p. 154.

flower," as it has been called. His characters knew the pulsing vibrancy of life, but they knew also that ~~the~~ pulse grows slow and its gloss wears off. The flame dies and the ashes are left.

Vittoria was a woman who lived the philosophy summarized in the "Gather ye rosebuds while ye may" theme. She approached life with a vow to "eat, drink, and be merry," but she carried always in her heart the second line--"for tomorrow we die." She and Flamineo and the Duchess are alive to the audience, for they faced a problem, memorably, which is every man's--death.

The mood of Webster's play breathes so of mortal matters that Edmonds, writing on the "tragic atmosphere" of John Webster, goes so far as to say that all other things--thought, character, imagery, mood and diction all go to help create the mood--he believes their chief function is to help create this atmosphere of blackness.

Even at the end of The White Devil, when the English ambassadors come in with Giovanni, when Vittoria and Flamineo, and all the other perpetrators of crime are dead and the revengers apprehended, something is lacking. The forces of justice and righteousness are supposedly re-established. Somehow, one cannot be sure that they will be able to rise, phoenix-like, from the ashes of a world dominated by Vittoria Corombona and her ilk, a world which she had summarily described in her cry at the death

of Brachiano: "This place is hell."¹

In one sense, then, Webster, in this play, violated Aristotle's idea that characters must be "true to life"; in another sense, he did not. His characters were believable, sketched against their own background--a background of corruption, vice, intrigue, dissemblance and a desperate defiance of death. On the other hand, his world was an unnatural one: there were pitifully few good people in it and they were pale beside his magnificent villains and villainess. The corruption of Renaissance Italy is not the whole of life: Webster makes one feel that its depraved characters not only jeopardized but excluded, by their existence, the life of any others. In this sense, then, that his world was unreal, so also his characters were not completely "true to life."

4. Consistency: A Quality of Vittoria Corombona

Vittoria is consistent to the character Webster has made her out to be. Glamorous evil is her stock in trade, but, like the intelligent woman that she is portrayed to be, she knows it is not life's whole story. Although she seems to tempt justice, almost, in the first act, she is not immune to fear or completely impervious to the power of a curse. Her mother, overhearing the love scene between her and Brachiano, says:

¹Ibid., p. 177.

See thy act, Judas-like,--betray in kissing
Maiest thou be envied during his short breath,
And pittied like a wretch after his death!¹

Vittoria answers: "O me accurst!"²

In the last scene of the play, also, it is not surprising to see her frightened at first by Flamineo's threats: that proves only that she is human and a woman. In a minute, she is her old defiant self again, facing death desperately:

My soule, like to a ship in a black storme,
Is driven I know not whither.

The fright is not inconsistent, but neither is her final flaunting of death. When she was sentenced in the courtroom, she screamed

Dye with those pills in your moste cursed mawe,
Should bring you health! or while you sit ath the Bench
Let your owne spittle choake you.

.....

That the last day of judgement may so find you,
And leave you the same devill you were before!³

Even a woman who could scream thus at such a time might be expected, humanly speaking, to flinch in the face of eternity. Not Vittoria however!

Again, hearkening back to the character Webster has portrayed her to be, she is manifestly bad to begin with, and her world is

¹Ibid., p. 120.

²Ibid.

³Ibid., p. 144.

one of corruption. She grows in this vice as the play progresses. In the first scene, she trembled under a parent's curse. In the trial scene, she has grown bolder. Tempting the very fates she demands of her accusers:

~~Sum~~ up my faults, I pray, and you shall find,
That beauty, and gay clothes, and a merry heart,
And a good stomach to a feast, are all,
All the poor crimes that you can charge me with.¹

By the final scene, her boldness has reached its climax. She has nothing to lose, she thinks. She has not forgotten that the "grave's a fine and private place but none I think, do there embrace."² She has forgotten--or lost all hope--of anything the other side of that grave except the hell she has created and named. She is consistent to the title which she has been given.

To summarize the application of Aristotle's theory to Vittoria, this can be said:

Consistent to her ambitious and adulterous self throughout the play, Vittoria Corombona is proprietary to the woman that she is, though she misuses her feminine charms constantly. She is even true to life, if the one who meets her for the first time is willing to suspend his own world for awhile and enter her universe where moral depravity, panderism, bloody extraordinary revenge and black cynicism are the ordinary inhabitants.

¹Ibid., p. 142.

²Andrew Marvell, "To His Coy Mistress."

B. The Duchess of Malfi

The second of Webster's great tragic masterpieces was written a few years after The White Devil. Although Lucas and some others of Webster's critics openly prefer the earlier work, The Duchess of Malfi has received more universal acceptance and been far more frequently presented than The White Devil.

A summary of the play is as follows: A young widow, the Duchess of Malfi, is forbidden by her two brothers, Ferdinand and the Cardinal, to marry again. Bosola, their informer, is to work in her service and spy upon her. The duchess, however, privately woos and weds her steward Antonio. Bosola finds out about the birth of her first child and informs the brothers. Later, when her brother Ferdinand has openly berated her for what he terms lechery, she informs him that she is married. Having heard this, Ferdinand leaves her castle in a fit of fury; upon this event, Antonio and the Duchess decide to flee with their family which now consists of three children. Antonio is to go separately with the eldest son; the pretext for his hasty departure is that he has misused his stewardship. She, with the younger children and her maid, pretending that they are merely making a pilgrimage, go to Loretto. Near there, they are intercepted: the Duchess is imprisoned, mentally tortured, and finally, strangled, as are the children and her maid. Bosola is softened by the goodness and bravery of the woman in whose death he participated. One brother, Ferdinand, goes mad. He and the Cardinal, as well as Bosola and

Antonio, are all killed in the last act. The youthful son of Antonio and the duchess arrives to take over the kingdom denied to his mother.

1. The "Goodness" of the Duchess

The duchess lives in a world of corruption as did Vittoria, but, unlike Vittoria, she herself is good. She stands in contrast to the dramatist's "white devil" and to another woman in her own play, Julia, the Cardinal's mistress.

At first glance, the reader or viewer is halted by the very shock of her goodness--seemingly pearl-white against the opaque black of Vittoria. Chaucer's definition of tragedy as the story of one who "stood in great prosperitie and is fallen out of heigh degree into myserie and endeth wretchedly"¹ at first comes to mind. The impression is short-lived, however. She does have a hamartia which makes her, in Aristotelian fashion, "good but not too good."

It lies not in her marrying below her station. Lucas scoffs properly at those who maintain, narrowly, that it is injudicious in the best circles to marry one's butler. Her tragic error lies not in her choice of partner but in the way she goes about effecting the marriage. We might call the Duchess' action a cer-

¹ Geoffrey Chaucer, "The Prologue of the Monk's Tale" of The Canterbury Tales. The Poetical Works of Chaucer, ed. by F. N. Robinson (Boston, 1933), p. 225.

tain wilfulness which is not excused even by the extenuating circumstance in which she is placed. She is not just the pathetic creature, passive instead of actor. Immediately after her brothers have left the court in Act One, she pronounces her intention, showing very definite self-direction. She says:

If all my royall kindred
Lay in my way unto this marriage:
I'll'd make them my low foote-steps: And even now,
Even in this hate (as men in some great battalies)
By apprehending danger, have achiev'd
Almost impossible actions: I have heard souldiers say so,
So I through frights and threatnings, will assay
This dangerous venture.¹

Later, after she has proposed to Antonio, and he has indicated his willingness to be her spouse, Cariola comes from behind the screen, the witness to their contract. The Duchess says:

I have heard Lawyers say, a contract in a Chamber
(Per verba de presenti) is absolute marriage.

Antonio asks blessing upon their marriage and the duchess says:

What can the Church force more?
How can the Church build faster?
We now are man and wife, and 'tis the Church
That must but echo this.

Later Cariola comments:

Whether the spirit of greatness, or of woman
Raigne most in her, I know not, but it shewes
A fearfull madness. I owe her much of pitty.²

There seems to be a haste here which has not time nor willing-

¹ Lucas, Works, II, 46, 47.

² Ibid., p. 51.

ness to consultation with the Church or its representatives. It is not at all evident from the context of the play that it would be impossible for them to get a priest to marry them, and, ordinarily, it is only in such extreme circumstances, as when a person is in a remote spot, inaccessible and infrequently visited by a priest, that such a verbal contract is recognized as valid.

The Duchess' wilfulness is almost a lust: her haste without consulting the Church, to declare a marriage which the Church "must echo" is a mistake which might well be called "tragico."

Subsequent action of the play bears out this idea of self-direction. Although there is no moral error involved, her decision to eat what is offered by Bosola precipitates the birth of her child. As a result of prematurely induced labor and birth due to the upset caused by the apricots, the secret that she has borne a child reaches Bosola, the informer. Antonio says there's left "not time for her remove" from the court as they had planned. After the child is born, Antonio drops a piece of paper, in the court of the palace, on which a child's nativity is calculated. Bosola picks it up, knows that the Duchess has had a son, and sends word to her brothers.

When Ferdinand comes to court, he steals into her chamber. She, thinking Antonio, with whom she has just been exchanging banter, is still there, gives him the perfect opening to accuse her. She says:

I'll assure you
 You shall get no more children till my brothers
 Consent to be your Ghossips: have you lost your tongue?
 (She turns and sees Ferdinand)
 'Tis welcome:
 For know, whether I am doom'd to live, or die,
 I can doe both like a Prince.¹

Here the duchess has reaffirmed her determination to go through with this, regardless of consequences. Later she sends Ferdinand off to Ancona, intending to join him there later. They have concocted the charge of "unjust stewardship" against Antonio in order to make his dismissal seem appropriate: she is discussing the matter with Bosola who praises Antonio. She says:

This good one that you speake of, is my husband.²

Bosola suggests she feign a pilgrimage to the shrine of Our Lady of Loretto in order to cover her departure, and she decides to take his advice rather than that of Cariola who wants her to proceed by way of the baths at Lucca or the Spa. Near there, of course, ~~she~~ and her two younger children are captured never to be released, alive. About even her death there seems to be a certain amount of self-direction. At least she is not, like her maid, dragged off screaming unwillingness to die. When questioned by Bosola as to whether the manner of her death terrified her, she answers: with what seems a fearless embrace of her fate:

¹ Ibid., II, 72.

² Ibid., II, 78.

Not a whit
 What would it pleasure me to have my throate out
 With diamonds? or to be smothered
 With Cassia? or to be shot to death with pearles?
 I know death hath ten thousand severall doores
 For men to take their Exits; and 'tis found
 They go on such strange geometiricall hinges,
 You may open them both wayes: any way, for heaven sake,
 So I were out of your whimpering: Tell my brothers,
 That I perceive death (now I am well awake)
 Best guift is they can give or I can take
 I would faine put off my last woman's fault,
 I'd not be tedious to you.¹

Her end is the inevitable result of the entanglements of this web, but one feels as though the Duchess of Malfi foresaw this possibility and made the initial step anyway. With this in mind, the first step in her tragic progress--the wilful, almost lustful--haste to marry Antonio can be called her tragic flaw or hamartia.

The duchess' character, however, is definitely depicted as generally good. This is done before she ever enters upon the scene in Act I, by Antonio, then her steward, in his conversation with Delio. He has just finished summarizing the Cardinal's and Antonio's characteristics with grim remarks like "The Spring in his face is nothing but the Ingendring of Toades,"² concerning the former's and "a most perverse, and turbulent nature"³ of the latter. Now his voice can be imagined to soften as he says of the duchess:

¹Ibid., II, 99.

²Ibid., II, 41.

³Ibid.

But for their sister (the right noble Duchesse)
 You never fix'd you (r) eye on three faire Medalls,
 Cast in one figure, of so different temper;
 For her discourse, it is so full of Rapture,
 You only will begin, then to be sorry
 When she doth end her speech: and wish (in wonder)
 She held it lesse vaine-glory to talke much,
 Then your pennance, to heare her: whilst she speakes,
 She throwes upon a man so sweete a looke,
 That it were able to raise one to a Galliard
 That lay in a dead palsey; and to doate
 On that sweete countenance; but in that looke,
 There speaketh so divine a continence,
 As cuts off all lascivious, and wine hope.¹

Having tallied many of her assets, Antonio seems to want to correct any impression he might have given that the duchess' virtues are merely matters of charm. He says:

Her dayes are practis'd in such noble virtue,
 That sure her nights (nay more her very sleepes)
 Are more in Heaven, then other Ladies Shrifts
 Let all sweet Ladies break their flattering Glasses
 And dresse themselves in her.²

Antonio can hardly go further than to say, as he does above, that it is said that the duchess' sleeps are more concerned with heavenly matters than are other ladies' confessions.

Much later in the play when she has been apprehended and imprisoned by her brothers, the duchess, defending her husband against the remarks of Bosola about Antonio's low birth, shows what goodness and virtue mean to her. She says:

¹Ibid., II, 42.

²Ibid.

Man is most happy when's owne actions
Be arguments, and examples of his Vertue.¹

To her, worthwhile achievement is virtuous living. That she herself lives according to that belief is revealed by the way she meets death. When Bosola asks her if she fears death, the tone of her answer makes light of what she regards as entrance into another life, whatever fears she may feel within her heart. She says:

Who would be afraid on't?
Knowing to meete such excellent company
In th' other world.²

Bosola confirms her virtue which finally moves him to sorrow for his treacherous deeds. He calls hers "sacred Innocence."

By her own speech and actions as well as by the remarks of others, then, the Duchess of Malfi is portrayed as a character possessing goodness. This is not to deny her tragic error of hastily rushing into marriage by private vow without even consulting the Church. She is "good but not too good" in the Aristotelian sense.

1. Is the Duchess of Malfi Proprietous?

The duchess' characterization has propriety too. Even in the wooing scene where she proposes to her steward, she apologizes for her forwardness, saying,

¹Ibid., II, 88.

²Ibid., II, 99.

The misery of us, that are borne great!
We are forc'd to wo(o), because none dare woo us:¹

When she and Antonio and Cariola are exchanging banter in her chamber, just before the discovery by Ferdinand, she plays the part of the coquette, playfully twitting her husband:

I hope in time 'twill grow into a custome,
That Noblemen shall come with cap, and knee,
To purchase a nights lodging, of their wives.²

She is feminine enough to want to be sought after, for all her power of momentous decision. Antonio fills in this outline of her womanly temperament, saying,

Pray thee, (Cariola), let's steale forthe the roome
And let her talke to herselfe: I have divers times
Serv'd her the like, when she hath chafde extreameley:
I love to see her angry.³

Her womanly love is far more than coquetry or desire for physical pleasure, however. Fully conscious of the danger to herself, she summons up all her courage and strength when she and her family, attempting to escape, are overtaken by the messenger Bosola near the shrine of Our Lady of Loretto. Hers is a giving love. She says to her husband:

Therefore by all my love. . . . I doe conjure you⁴
To take your eldest sonne, and flyetowards Willaine,

¹Ibid., II, 50.

²Ibid., II, 71.

³Ibid., II, 72.

⁴Ibid., II, 86.

Antonio's description of the duchess to Delio in the first act reveals her suitable womanly qualities. He speaks of "discourse . . . full of Rapture," of "so sweet a looke" and "sweete countenance."¹

After she and Antonio have vowed themselves to one another, Cariola, her maid, comments:

Whether the spirit of greatnes, or of woman
Raigne most in her, I know not, but it shewes
A fearfull madness I owe her much of pittie.²

The young duchess, herself, when Ferdinand castigates her for having ruined her reputation, asks why she, more than others in the world, should be denied the state of life natural to most women, even noble women. She says:

Why should only I,
Of all the other Princes of the World
Be Casde up, like a holy Relique? I have youth,
And a little beaultie.³

This quality of propriety finds its most tender expression in her death scene when she bids Cariola:

I pray-thee, looke thou givst my little boy
Some sirrop for his cold, and let the girle
Say her prayers, ere she sleeps.⁴

The Duchess of Malfi is truly praprietous, in the fullest

¹Ibid., II, 42.

²Ibid., II, 51.

³Ibid., II, 74.

⁴Ibid., II, 99.

sense. She shares many of the virtues of the "valiant woman" so described in the Book of Proverbs, courageous at a most crucial time in any life, yet remembering and remarking on one of the little details of care for the children she is leaving. The Duchess knows the extent of her sacrifice, but she has been measured and has not been found wanting.

3. The Duchess of Malfi: True to Life

"Truth to life," the next trait enumerated by Aristotle and now to be applied to the Duchess of Malfi includes the idea that the character must be convincing. Perhaps that is one of the reasons why he thinks the tragic hero should be good but not too good. Neither complete flawlessness nor intrinsic depravity in a human being is real enough to enable an audience to see themselves in the characters which are living and suffering before them. Lucas remarks that it is not the misfortunes of perfect characters which would be unbearable, but the characters themselves would be. Angels make poor dramatis personae; it is human beings that we need.¹

The Duchess of Malfi's haste to achieve her marriage to Antonio which, as stated previously, might be considered her tragic flaw, makes her more human and believable than she might have been otherwise. Without it, she could have been as artificial

¹ Lucas, Tragedy, pp. 112-113.

as were the wax statues of her husband and children which Ferdinand had shown to her to try to drive the duchess to submission.

With this, the first indication that there is some conflict within this lady is given. She is not the brave but stoic figure being led off to death as the lamb is led to slaughter. She is a warm vivacious woman who plays the game of life vigorously, if not always cautiously. She has gambled when she married Antonio: she went ahead even though she knew the odds were against her. One may not always agree with the direction of her energy: that she felt a two way drag, he cannot deny. The struggle between her desire to seize the happiness for which she yearns and the caution-giving knowledge of the price she may have to pay for it has existed. She fought the battle and decided to take the happiness with its not unlikely consequences.

Perhaps it is the character development which Webster ascribes to the duchess that makes her true to life. She is not stagnant while her world crumbles about her. Given the crises she had to face, the woman would have to develop or disintegrate, too, with her world. The duchess does not oblige with the first-mentioned possibility as her tormenters would like to have her do.

An example of this development can be found in a comparison of her first and final appearances. The blushing wooer of Act One who tells Antonio that she loves him, since he cannot from his position tell her, knows that she is advancing into a "wilderness" where neither "path" nor friendly clue will be her

guide. However, she is to Antonio, as described in her own words,

a yong widow
That claimes you for her husband and like a widow
I use but halfe a blush in't.¹

By the fourth act, after she has been imprisoned, been shown wax figures of what she thinks is her dead husband and children, and stripped of her kingdom, she can utter these words of solemn self-appraisal:

I am acquainted with sad misery,
As the tan'd galley-slave is with his Oare,
Necessity makes me suffer constantly
And custome makes it easie--²

No longer the "young widow" but now the fully developed womanly character, the duchess knows that having had suffering and having used it well, she has gathered strength to face the even greater trials ahead. She has learned well her lessons in the school of sorrow. The duchess, too, has met a problem memorably which is of special interest because of its universality--the problem of death.

In her death, all of human pain seems to be epitomized. The "sunt lacrimae rerum" of Vergil would be the appropriate dirge for this woman not unlike ourselves who revealed such a capacity for human magnificence. This magnificence, as well as that human weakness which led to what has been called her tragic error, make

¹Ibid., II, 50.

²Ibid., II, 94.

her audiences feel that she is true to life. This understanding of her, the enlistment of the audience's sympathetic understanding and alliance of themselves with her could not have been achieved without some complexity and development of character. Had she remained the pearl-white passive victim, she might have been pathetic but hardly capable of enabling people to feel her a type of themselves and a parallel to her struggles within their own conflicts. Also, had she not changed from the lovely young widow of Act I to something else, as any human being must change, under pressure of trials like those she underwent, she would not have been genuine. Complexity of character, then, did much to make the Duchess of Malfi "true to life."

Lucas remarks that complexity of character is the most important sphere of advance of modern tragedy and, perhaps, among other things, it is this complexity which Webster catches that makes his characters real or true to life.

Thorndike believes that, unlike the masters of melodrama, Webster was one of those who was seeking to make tragedy the revelation of the philosophy and poetry of human suffering and ruin. He says of his characterization:

Moreover, Webster, like Chapman and Jonson, attempts the elaborate and comprehensive delineation of character. Tragedy, in his view as well as theirs, involved the full portraiture of extraordinary figures. In these respects, too, he must have learned something from Shakespeare; for though specific indebtedness is not clear, the processes of his art resemble Shakespeare's. Like the latter, he was absorbed in the study of the effects of crime upon character, and he acquired the power of realizing these momentarily with

amazing dramatic truth. In fine, Webster, in spite of his attachment to a type of tragedy theatrically popular and absurdly unreal, was emulous, not of the masters of melodrama; but of those who were making tragedy the revelation of the philosophy and poetry of human suffering and ruin.¹

The duchess was that representative of human suffering of which Thorndike speaks, but she was a real individual, too. It may be argued that her world was too corrupt to be real, but never that she was not actual, though, idealized, flesh and blood.

Webster's use of historical account for the basis of his story may have helped it to be true to life in the Aristotelian sense.

Aristotle, himself, says that what one accepts as true he believes as possible. His idea is that a dramatic poet need not give an historical account of an incident, but he may use plot, names, locations to give a flavor of authenticity to what he is writing. In The Duchess of Malfi, the poet draws largely from Bandello, Belleforest and William Painter through whose hands the story of the real duchess has passed. Of course, however, he does not hesitate to diverge from this account and inject ideas of his own.

That "believableness" comes from hearing historical names and places is borne out by the comments made by John Masefield in the aforementioned account of influences upon himself as a developing writer. He tells of the peculiarly gripping effect

¹Ashley H. Thorndike, "Introduction," in Webster and Tourneur ed. by Schelling, pp. 16 and 17.

which the-reading of sagas had upon him when once he discovered these. These were the Icelandic sagas translated by William Morris, over-burdened with genealogies at the beginning: these genealogies connoted respect for the tradition of the sagas' truth. After reading them for some time, he found all modern story-telling thin and unreal in comparison. The very fact that they had been written down in the Middle Ages, having been in the minds and mouths of storytellers for over two hundred years, made them real. They seemed, he thought, to be happening before the readers' very eyes.¹

This was also exemplified by the historical plays of Shakespeare and even by his tragedies. In Macbeth, for instance, he combines two accounts from Holinshed's Chronicles of England, Ireland, and Scotland. The English people accepted and enjoyed these, partially because they had a tradition within their theatre of drama based upon truth. The early seventeenth century was not long past the time when disagreement in matters of religion had begun. Before Henry VIII's denial of the Pope's authority to effect laws concerning marriage and the resultant breaking off of the English Church from the center of Christendom, there had been, in the main, unity of religious belief in England. The breakup of the modern world was just beginning to be felt in the culture of the English people. Although long before John Webster,

¹Masefield, So Long To Learn, p. 86.

Elizabeth had forbidden most of the religious drama to be presented on the English stage, her people could not immediately discard the background of Christian cultural tradition which had been theirs.

While the Mystery and Morality plays may not have been viewed by the specific audience which watched The Duchess of Malfi, their background was one which enabled them to understand the ideas and language of these dramas. Proof of this can be found in many lines occurring within individual Elizabethan plays. In Hamlet, for instance, the prince says Claudius sent his father to the grave "unhuzzled, disappointed and unaneled." He means that the king had had no chance to go to confession, had not received Holy Viaticum and was not anointed: these are the three "Last Sacraments" of the Church, under benefit of which every Catholic hopes to die.

To a modern critic that line might have to be interpreted. To the Elizabethan audience who shared the Christian culture of western Europe, the words and their significance were self-explanatory.

Now, just as they could not leave this cultural tradition completely behind them, so also these people in their drama had been accustomed to stories based upon truth. They remembered, or at least had heard of, the Mystery Plays which were based upon Scripture, so the habit of expecting a basis of truth for their plays was not altogether absent. Both The White Devil and The

Duchess of Malfi were based upon true stories which had come out of Renaissance Italy. They had been told and retold, embellished and altered, but to the audience they had an aura of authenticity.

The point of a discussion of the Elizabethans' custom of receiving historically based plays is that, because of this, they would be more ready to welcome plays like The Duchess of Malfi and The White Devil. If one objects that historical accuracy was not a point with Webster, let us remember that neither was it with that greatest of Elizabethans, William Shakespeare. The Elizabethans didn't care, but an historical basis for a play or a character within a drama made them, in their eyes, True to Life.

4. The Duchess of Malfi, a Developing But Consistent Character

That the Duchess of Malfi is consistent to the character which Webster has made her out to be is a point which is illustrated in many ways throughout this play. A necessary preliminary to a discussion of her consistency is a decision as to just how Webster portrays her character. What one can expect of the duchess is antecedent to an evaluation of her character as consistent or inconsistent.

That she is good but not too good, propertious to her role as feminine protagonist, and true to life within her world, corrupt though that world is, has already been decided. That these first two traits can be predicated of her at all reveals a certain consistency, and they are characteristics which can generally be

attributed to her throughout the play.

In addition to these, Webster presents her in the first act as able to make decisions and to act upon them. The duchess says to Cariola about her own marriage:

And even now
Even in this hate (as men in some great battailes
By apprehending danger, have achiev'd
Almost impossible actions: I have heard Souldiers say so),
So, I, through frights, and threatnings, will assay
This dangerous venture.¹

Having made her decision, she will accept the consequences, remembering, she says, some men who, by the very fact that they foresaw, feared, and prepared for danger, have conquered. This is the same brave woman who in Act IV, though taunted and tormented by punishments diabolically planned for her by her captors, says to her hired executioner Bosola, "I am Duchesse of Malfi still."² Their torture has not enabled them to break her indomitable spirit.

The power, as well as the courage, to meet tragedy in the face, has not altered, either between the time she appears as the strong young widow and the moment when she is the helpless victim of her brothers' avarice and greed. When she knows that she cannot escape from the Arragonian brethren's cruelty and when she thinks Antonio and her children are killed, she reaches out,

¹Lucas, Works, II, 46, 47.

²Ibid., II, 97.

almost, for death. She meets it with the courage befitting a duchess. She says:

Tell my brothers,
That I perceive death (now I am well awake)
Best guift is, they can give or I can take.¹

Her courage, then, is consistent. Bosola has described her courage and fortitude eloquently when her brother Ferdinand inquired as to how his sister was bearing herself in her imprisonment.

Bosola says:

Nobly: I'll describe her:
She's sad, as one long us'd to 't and she seemes
Rather to welcome the end of misery
Then shun it: a behaviour so noble,
As gives a majestie to adversitie:
You may discerne the shape of lovelinesse
More perfect, in her teares, then in her smiles;
She will muse foure houres together: and her silence,
(Methinkes) expresseth more, then if she spake.²

Her womanly love is equally consistent. The love which she vowed for Antonio when she proposed to him is stronger, years later (having stood the test of sacrifice), when she says to Antonio, bidding him fly towards Milan rather than go to her brothers who have sent for him:

I know not which is best,
To see you dead, or part with you:

¹Ibid., II, 99.

²Ibid., II, 99.

The altruism of her love triumphs and she sends him off so that they do not

venture all this poore remainder
In one unlucky bottom.¹

This love reaches what is the peak of self-negation (and, from the audience's view, pathos), when, confronted with death, she asks Cariola to give her little boy some syrup for his cough and let her little girl say her prayers. Unmindful of self, she is concerned only for the children she is leaving behind.

The duchess' love, then, is surely consistent throughout the play. That it grows from girlish affection to true conjugal and motherly love is thoroughly consistent with the duchess' character.

Courage, pride proper to her position, tender love and magnitude of soul, the power to decide and live according to a decision (even if certain facets of it are not always well-advised) --these are qualities which the Duchess of Malfi exhibits consistently throughout the play. It is important to remember that Aristotle's "consistency of the characters" is not behavior according to a conventional pattern or according to the standards of a particular audience. Rather, it is truth to self or type: a character should act as would a person of the type he has been depicted to be. Achilles acted inconsistently, for instance, but

¹Ibid., II, 86.

that was consistency or "truth to type" for him. The duchess is a woman of action and tenderness. She is truly consistent.

Good but not too good, propitious to her role as woman and duchess, a character who was true to life and thus believable and consistent, though developing: these were the qualities of the tragic victim of Italy which have enabled her to live in Webster's drama as "duchesse of Malfi still."

C. Comments on the Lesser Dramatic Figures of Webster's Tragedies

It has been stated that some of the characters, aside from protagonists, bear an important share of the burden of action in John Webster's plays. An examination of these lesser figures sheds further light upon a view of the relationships of Webster to Aristotle's theories concerning the tragic hero.

Although The White Devil is sometimes even entitled for Brachiano, being called The Tragedy of Paulo Giordano Ursini Duke of Brachiano, and Vittoria Corombona, still, the character who seems to be next to Vittoria, in importance, is Flamineo, her brother. In him, Webster has combined what Professor Stoll considers two incongruous and incompatible roles--that of tool-villain and malcontent. As a tool-villain, his role is to implicitly obey the master and, as malcontent, to meditate gloomily and rail and flout.¹

¹Stoll, John Webster: The Periods of His Work as Determined by His Relations to the Drama of His Day, pp. 124-25.

Flamíneo is the tool of Brachiano's lust; he definitely implements his sister's ambition as well. Achieving stature as an individual in his own right, Flamíneo's marriage to evil seems a sturdier bond than Brachiano's or than even his white-devil sister's.

"Goodness" in the Aristotelian or any other sense was certainly not one of Flamíneo's attributes. He indicates his willingness to serve Brachiano in any way in his opening remark to the duke:

Pursew your noble wishes, I am prompt
As lightning to your service, O my Lord!¹

That he has assumed this role of pander to further his advancement is stated when Flamíneo chides his mother for the poverty of their family. He says:

. . . Shall I
Having a path so open and so free
To my preferment, still retaine your milke
In my pale forehead? no this face of mine
I'll arme and fortifie with lusty wine,
Gainst shame and blushing.²

Having found that honorable means made him "not a suite the richer," Flamíneo has decided that he will make use of other methods. He does pursue evil more consistently than anyone else in the play, either fostering the lowest desires in others or

¹ Lucas, Works, I, 113.

² Ibid., I, 121.

helping to satisfy them, even when it requires physical violence on his own part. When Vittoria has given Brachiano the idea for the murder of her husband and his duchess, he obliges by breaking Camillo's neck. When his brother Marcello gets in his way, later in the play, Flameneo stabs and kills him also. He serves whoever is on top. When Brachiano has been poisoned, Flameneo goes to his sister Vittoria for payment for his deeds in her behalf. When Vittoria refuses him any reward, he turns upon her and her maid and would have killed them had the revengers of Isabella not come upon the scene.

As tool-villain, Flameneo obeys the directions of those who favor him, but he uses them as they use him. Every action is measured by whether or not it will bring money or preferment his way. Even Cornelia, realizing her son's viciousness, utters what is almost the worst thing a mother could express to her child when she says:

O that I ne're had borne thee!¹

Flameneo voices an "Amen" to her sentiment when he says at his death,

My life was a black charnell.²

Flameneo is separated from the realm of goodness by the comments of others, even his mother, upon him, by his own words, and by his deeds as well.

¹Ibid., I, 121.

²Ibid., I, 191.

Really, the pander is almost too despicable to be possible, or "true to life." More like a personification of supreme evil, Flameneo is more acceptable because of his function as realistic commentator upon his own personal actions as well as those of others. In this way, he is a chorus-like figure. For example, when they visit Vittoria at the house of convertites, Flameneo remarks about himself and Brachiano:

As in this world there are degrees of evils:
So in this world there are degrees of devils,
You'r a great Duke; I your poore secretarie.¹

Previously, he has judged Vittoria and interpreted the dream which she related to Brachiano in such a seemingly innocent manner in the first act. Flameneo says:

Excellent Divelli:
She hath taught him in a dreame
To make away his Dutchesse and her husband.²

Proprietous to his type--a pander to the evil desires of others, Flameneo rises above that role, if the verb "rises" may be applied to the character's dramatic (not moral) stature. Clifford Leech says Flameneo is a late type of the Machiavellian villain with no Tamburlanian glory about him, but who is made, still, a tragic figure. Creation of such a character is an especially remarkable feat because, of all trades, the pander's is

¹Ibid., I, 155.

²Ibid., I, 119.

most despised.¹ The formal position of this character in the play is not nearly so important as Webster's depiction of Flamineo makes it. Malcontent, pander, murderer, as well as chorus, observer of the actions of others and manipulator of action himself, he is no common tool-villain. From the aforementioned first line of the play, where Flamineo professes himself to be at the service of Brachiano's will, to his final "Farewell glorious villaines," as he dies, Flamineo is consistent to his desperado-like temperament. Courting damnation with eyes open, Flamineo goes down to death as he has lived.

Brachiano's characterization suffers in contrast with the vividness of Flamineo's. Aside from the line which he utters as he lies dying of the poison administered through his helmet, he has none of the stature of the tragic figure. Portrayed throughout the play not as the good man, but as the proud, imperious, sensuous one whose passion drives him to evil means of fulfilling it, he is still the tool of Vittoria and her pander-brother. Flamineo professes to serve him, but the cynical, mocking comments of the "tool villain" Flamineo, throughout The White Devil convey the impression that he is much more in command of the situation than is the Duke of Brachiano.

Upon Brachiano's death-bed, however, although he will soon

¹Leech, John Webster: A Critical Study, pp. 51, 52.

lapse into wild ravings when the conquerer death comes closer, for a moment Brachiano rises to the stature proper to the tragic hero, as he sees himself and his wife truly. Answering her lament of "O my good Lord!" he repudiates Vittoria with these words:

Away, you have abus'd me
 You have convoyd coyne forth our territories;
 Bought and sold offices; oppres'd the poore,
 And I nere dreamt on't
 Make up your accountes;
 Ile be mine owne Steward.¹

When Flamineo tells Brachinano to have patience, the latter answers:

Indeed I am (to) blame
 For did you ever heare the duskie raven
 Chide blacknesse? Or was't ever knowne, the divell
 Rail'd against Cloven Creatures?²

Here, although he realizes that he has been used to further the evil desires of others, Paul Orsino, the Duke of Brachiano, recognizes and acknowledges that he himself must not expect to attract good people to himself when his own life has been rotten at its very core.

As a character who yields to his passions, taking immoral means to eliminate any obstacles which stood in the path of satisfaction of his inordinate desires, but a person who then

¹ Ibid., I, 174-75.

² Ibid., I, 174-75.

feels remorse over his past acts, Brachiano is true to life. He is not the diabolical villain who is believable only within Webster's dark world, he is a weak sinful man who, confronted with death, fears the accounting of his life he will have to give. Since he does not change radically from the passionate man that he was when he pursued Vittoria, but merely falters when faced with the suddenly precipitated test which every man must take, Brachiano can be said to be portrayed as consistent to his own character.

In The Duchess of Malfi, the duchess' Arragonian brethren play an important part. It is they who, at the beginning of the play, forbid her remarriage and proceed to plot her torture and death when she disobeys their unreasonable demands. They are base characters: Bosola described them in the opening scene. He and the cardinal have just engaged in a verbal tiff. When he leaves, Bosola mutters:

Some fellowes (they say) are possessed with the divell,
but this great fellow, were able to possess the greatest
Divell and make him worse.¹

When Antonio asks Bosola if the cardinal has denied him some suit, Bosola continues his character delineation:

He, and his brother, are like Plum-trees (that grow crooked
over standing-pooles) they are rich, and ore-laden with
Fruite, but none but crows, yes, and catter-pillers feede
on them.²

¹ Lucas, Works, II, 38.

² Ibid., II, 38.

The cardinal and his brother do little to mitigate this harsh judgment of themselves. They are evil and consistently so, choosing always the violent course of action which suits their own evil ends until each, reacting true to type, meets his downfall. One brother, the Duke Ferdinand, tortured by his own guilt, blanches before the realization of what he has done and goes mad. The Cardinal, equally tortured though sane, admits his guilty conscience. With book in hand, he soliloquizes:

I am puzzell'd in a question about hell.
 He saies, in hell, there's one materiall fire.
 And yet it shall not burne all men alike.
 Lay him by: How tedious is a guilty conscience!
 When I looke into the Fish-ponds, in my Garden,
 Methinkes I see a thing arm'd with a rake
 That seemes to strike at me.¹

Ferdinand and the Cardinal die, consistent to the characteristics which they are alleged to possess: they are brave when armed with power and weapons but cowardly when they have only their past deeds to speak in their favor. Ferdinand is lucid enough for a moment before his death to recognize the cause of all his misery and enunciate it. He laments:

My sister, Oh! my sister, there's the cause on't.
 Whether we fall by ambition, blood, or lust,
 Like Diamonds we are cut with our owne dust.²

He has here admitted the guilt of his actions, realizing that his life might have been otherwise, and he has expressed the

¹Ibid., II, 121.

²Ibid., II, 123.

idea of the inevitability of retribution for crimes like his.

Could it be argued that their deeds were not adequately motivated? Hardly, for although Ferdinand does not express until Act IV the motives for his acts, the Elizabethan audiences assumed that the reasons were something like that. He says:

I had a hope
(Had she continued widow) to have gain'd
An infinite masse of Treasure by her death:
And that was the mayne cause; her marriage
That drew a stream of gall quite through my heart;¹

That he had hoped to get his sister's money, and that her marriage which seemed to mean the end of such a hope suddenly aroused Ferdinand to excess passion is a motivation which the Elizabethan audience may not have guessed specifically, but they had a general idea that something like that must have moved him. It was one of their unconscious conventions to accept on their stage what might seem a disproportionately evil character to a modern audience. Such a villain was a type to them: when such a character presented himself on stage, a long character-revelation was not necessary. The people who watched them were accustomed to the traits of a revenger, a jealous brother, or a hired informer, and they were willing to fill in the gaps.

This practice enabled the audience to accept base characters like the duke and the cardinal, brothers of the Duchess of Malfi, as propertious to their type--that of the greedy, Renaissance

¹Ibid., II, 101.

villain. They are possible within the world of the Elizabethan theatre. Only however, if one steps into the world of darkness and corruption, as did the people of Webster's audience, can he find such characters as the Cardinal and Ferdinand true to life.

A word about Bosola in relation to the depiction of a tragic character is in order. He, more than any other, seemed to mark a real advance in character development. From ^a hired informer (a much-despised profession) and murder-accomplice, he grew to the man who, under the tutelage of the Duchess in her school of suffering, weeps over her death and strives to fulfill her request that her body be bestowed upon her women. Later, he reverts to utilitarian motives, but he, rather than any of the others, realizes the horror of his deeds and the possibility that there was another way he might have lived. In the starts and stops of a man who is afraid it is too late, he goes through a struggle and is purified. In this sense, he conforms more to an Aristotelian tragic character than do most of the others.

Even a brief overview of the lesser characters of The Duchess of Malfi would not be complete without a discussion of Antonio, the duchess' steward who is raised, in marriage, to be her husband. Somehow, he never quite grows up to the promotion. Although he takes the same step toward destruction which the duchess has taken--a hasty and forbidden marriage, Antonio is not a character of the stature of the duchess at all. Antonio is somehow not the tragic hero.

Certainly he is good, a character who has won the trust and love of the Duchess. At the beginning of the play, he speaks highly of the French king for attempting to rid his court of corruption. That his love of justice is more than just mouth-honour is proved by the Cardinal a little later in the scene. The Cardinal and Ferdinand, having warned their sister not to marry again, are leaving her court. The Cardinal suggests that Ferdinand appoint Bosola as his spy or informer and, when, the duke says that Antonio would have been far more fit for such an office, the cardinal remarks:

You are deceived in him
His Nature is too honest for such businessse.¹

Throughout the entire play, Antonio shows himself worthy of the adjective "honest."

Antonio's propriety and consistency can scarcely be challenged. He is faithful steward and husband to the Duchess of Malfi, exhibiting those qualities of fidelity and devotion which are proper to his function and consistent to the man he is. Antonio's truth to life is obvious too: it is not unthinkable that one might meet an Antonio today in twentieth century real-life, as well as on the stage in Jacobean England. What is it, then, which seems to be missing from the depiction of this hero

¹Ibid., II, 43.

who shares her hamartia and who took the first step with the duchess?

Perhaps it is the fact that he is too close to every day-- to commonplace everyday-life to be a tragic hero. He is not idealized or made better than average at all. Why does he not take some more definite action during the play to save his duchess, the reader wonders. Once he becomes her husband, why does he not take command and defy, even if he fail, her wicked brothers? When Ferdinand threatens Antonio's wife, giving her a poniard, Antonio comments:

This hath a handle to't,
As well as a point--turne it towards him, and
So fasten the keene edge in his ranoke gall.¹

If he feels so strongly about it why Antonio does not turn the poniard toward Ferdinand himself is not clear.

Antonio seems not to emerge as a definitely chiseled figure himself. The duchess' steward, made her husband, the impression he leaves as steward is more vivid than that left as husband.

The last time Antonio and his duchess are together is at a spot near the shrine of Loretto. Her brothers have sent for Antonio. The duchess suspects foul play and tells him to fly to Milanine together with his eldest son. No doubt this is good advice since, as she says, it is not good to "venture all this

¹Ibid., II, 75.

poore remainder in one unlucky bottom."¹

However, one imagines the heroic husband refusing to leave his wife's side or devising some other scheme, more daring, perhaps, but one which will bring hope of their rescue together.

Antonio merely assents to her idea. He says:

You counsell safely
Best of my life, Farewell . . .²

When the duchess is imprisoned, tortured, and killed, Antonio is free. Ferdinand says he "Lurkes about Millaine." While the duchess' death draws from even her murderous brother the remark

"Cover her face. Mine eyes dazzle
she di'd yong.

Antonio's, when it comes, rouses no such response.

Antonio lives on into the last act. At Milan, getting premonitions of his duchess' death from an echo out of her grave, Antonio finally rises out of what might be called his mediocrity, saying:

Come, I'll be out of this Ague;
For to live thus, is not indeed to live.
It is a mockery, and abuse of life--
I will not henceforth save my selfe by halves,
Loose all, or nothing.³

¹Ibid., II, 86.

²Ibid.

³Ibid., II, 117, 118.

However, it is too late. The duchess is dead. Antonio dies in the next scene, at the hands of the informer Bosola. Of this man who is good, but not too good, propitious to his type, consistent and true to life, but who lacks magnitude, one cannot help feeling that the manner and time of his death is commensurate with his lack of tragic stature.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

To measure the characters presented in Elizabethan dramatist John Webster's Vittoria Corombona or The White Devil and The Duchess of Malfi, according to a standard of characterization expressed by Aristotle in his Poetics, has been the attempt of the writer of this thesis. That is, whether or not the protagonists and some of the lesser dramatis personae of Webster's two famous tragedies possess, individually, the traits which Aristotle considered to be requirements of the tragic hero has been investigated by means of specific analysis of the characters as delineated in these dramas.

It was pointed out, first of all, that although the two men were separated by twenty centuries of time and many aspects of culture, it is appropriate to apply a theory of characterization enunciated by the great critic of the Golden Age of Attic drama to the work of a playwright of what has been often called the "Golden Age" of the English theatre. Furthermore, the ideas concerning character expressed in the Poetics have been thought to be of universal significance and, since Webster is especially noteworthy for his memorable dramatic characters, a comparison of practice of John Webster to the theory of Aristotle would, it was

believed, illuminate a study of both.

An historical sketch of the knowledge of this critical document, the Poetics, in western Europe and particularly in England, made up the main part of Chapter two. This revealed that, although the Poetics was not known up until the Middle Ages in Christian Europe, from that time on it became progressively promulgated until, by the end of the sixteenth century, these critical rules, though sometimes distorted, were becoming familiar in England. The purpose of this chapter, with its additional comments on Elizabethan England, was to show that John Webster may have known of the existence and perhaps the content of the Poetics, but as an Elizabethan dramatist, he was probably not attempting to conform to it when he wrote his plays.

Chapter three stated the quotations from Aristotle's Poetics (using Samuel Butcher's translation) which concerned tragic characterization. Some of Butcher's, as well as some personal comments concerning the meaning and the context of Aristotle's statements, followed. Aristotle's four requirements of a tragic character are: goodness, propriety, truth to life and consistency.

The main chapter--four--consisted of an application of this criteria to Webster's dramatis personae of the two plays, in order to see if they in any way approximated Aristotle's concept of the tragic hero. Most of the characters of Webster's two plays were not good. Vittoria Corombona violated this first requirement of goodness since the purpose of her every act was the satisfaction

of her baser passions, and since she didn't care what means were used to bring about their fulfillment. The duchess, in contrast, was good: at first she seemed shockingly immaculate against the shadow of the woman called the "white devil," but her wilful haste in promoting immediate marriage, by private contract, with her steward Antonio, without consulting the Church, proved to be a tragic flaw. The Duchess and her husband, Antonio, were "good but not too good." Vittoria, Flameneo, Brachiano, the Cardinal, Ferdinand, Bosola--all these possessed more than the flaw of a generally good person as it might be revealed by a portrait painter.

The "White Devil" and the Duchess of Malfi were found to be proprieties to their sex. While the Duchess was tender and womanly, even Vittoria was not improper. She used her feminine wiles to make men perform evil deeds for her. The other characters also were suited to their types of revengers, pander, hired informer, avaricious relatives, or passion-driven lover.

Both the protagonists and those less than protagonists were generally consistent and motivated. The Duchess of Malfi's brave and tender character developed under suffering, until her love was one of self sacrifice and she could meet cruel death valiantly. Vittoria Corombona blanched momentarily in the face of death, but her final meeting with it was consistent to the bold desperation with which she met life. The consistency to self was true of the minor characters also. Flameneo proceeded

even to his death with the same defiant cynicism which had been his through life. One of the duchess' brothers went mad, as befitted his previous passionate objection to her marriage and the violent deeds with which he sought to punish it. The other brother was tortured by a guilty conscience, afraid when the time of reckoning came near; it seemed that he was bold when he was in power but trembling when he had only his deeds to speak for him. Only Bosola, the hired informer, was seemingly inconsistent to his former self. He seemed to repent but then returned to his former ways: his was more a character growth than a true inconsistency.

The Duchess seemed a real woman especially because of her character development, and the fact that her character was not portrayed as absolutely flawless. As for the others, Vittoria Corombona, Flamineo, Brachiano, the Arragonian brothers of the duchess, and even Bosola--these base characters were believable because they inhabited a world of darkness, death, blood, and corruption which it was Webster's unique talent to be able to create through imagery and diction. They were true to life within the world they inhabited.

Throughout the study, it was brought out that Webster idealized his characters as Aristotle thought proper. Though they are often wicked, the struggles of his men and women are important. That combined ability to capture human magnificence and frailty within his characterization made the application of the

tragic hero standard to Webster's dramatis personae seem especially appropriate. He may not consciously have attempted to follow the Greek critic's precepts, and an analysis of the goodness, propriety, consistency and truth to life of John Webster's characters of The White Devil and The Duchess of Malfi revealed both violations and conformity to Aristotle's ideas. However, the kinship of spirit, if not always of practice, between the two men which inevitably shone through such a comparison, makes this investigation rewarding for the student who seeks to understand the meaning and appreciate the universality of Aristotle's theories of character, as well as scrutinize the skill of character delineation of a great Elizabethan dramatist.

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APPROVAL SHEET

The thesis submitted by Mary Jane Grogan has been read and approved by three members of the Department of English.

The final copies have been examined by the director of the thesis and the signature which appears below verifies the fact that any changes have been incorporated, and that the thesis is now given final approval with reference to content, form, and mechanical accuracy.

The thesis is therefore accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Master of Arts.

May 24, 1955
Date

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